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Running Head: PERCEPTIONS OF UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Perceptions of Unwanted Sexual Behaviour on Public Transport:  
Exploring Transport Density and Behaviour Severity

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on bystander perceptions and expected responses to unwanted sexual behaviours on public transport. Level of blame, incident seriousness, likelihood of reporting and intervening were evaluated using a series of 6 vignettes that manipulated passenger density and severity of the behaviour. Half of the participants also viewed a video to raise their awareness of unwanted sexual behaviours. The results indicated that blame was attributed to the perpetrator and not the victim, with perpetrator blame, incident seriousness, and likelihood of reporting all being influenced by a passenger density and behaviour severity interaction. Increasing awareness of unwanted sexual behaviours had no effect with the exception of likelihood of intervention. Findings are discussed in relation to women's safety during peak and off peak travel and the role of the bystander here. The implications of this for women's safety are considered.

*Keywords:* Unwanted Sexual Behaviour, Reducing Sexual Offences, Public Transport, Density, Severity

## **Introduction**

While public transport systems have considerable social benefits, Yu and Smith (2014) suggest that individuals with no choice but to utilise public transport are ‘transit captive’ and vulnerable to victimisation. With females being more likely to use public transport than men (Ceccato, 2014) it is important they feel safe in this environment. However in London alone it has been reported that 11% of females have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour (defined here as sexual harassment and sexual assault) on public transport yet over 90% of these did not report it to the police (Transport for London [TfL], 2015).

Commonly cited reasons for non-reporting of unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport by victims and bystanders include viewing the incident as not being serious enough to report and not knowing how to or being unable/unwilling to report (Stringer, 2007; TfL, 2015). It has also been argued that wider prejudices keep the problem hidden, with women downplaying incidents because the emphasis is often on victim rather than perpetrator behaviour (Lo, 2013; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). For instance a female travelling alone in an empty carriage late at night may feel at fault because of their choice of travel time.

In response to these issues a number of initiatives have been implemented internationally to address the problem of non-reporting of unwanted sexual behaviour.

These include campaigns to increase awareness of unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport and to promote the ease of reporting of these (Gekoski et al, 2015). However Gekoski et al (2015) argue that more needs to be done to establish ‘what works’ in relation to reducing unwanted sexual behaviours on public transport, including exploring bystander responses to this. The current study therefore aims to explore bystander perceptions of unwanted sexual behaviours and subsequent expected bystander behaviours (reporting or intervening). Using a vignette approach, whether bystander perceptions and behaviours differ according to the severity of the incident, passenger density at the time of the incident and bystander awareness of unwanted sexual behaviours is considered.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Perceptions of unwanted sexual behaviour*

TfL (2015) report that almost 50% of victims of unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport were unable to categorise the behaviour they had experienced. This may be because there is considerable ambiguity in defining unwanted sexual behaviours, which may encompass verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment, unwanted physical contact, and which may overlap with more serious forms of unwanted sexual behaviour (Pina et al, 2009). Ambiguity has also been shown in the interpretation of unwanted sexual behaviours. For example, harassment is not always seen as such by males (Herrera et al, 2014; Madan and Nalla, 2016). Failing to correctly interpret such behaviours may mean they risk becoming normalised (Bates, 2014; Herrera et al, 2014). Normalisation of

sexual harassment has been suggested as a reason for the under-reporting of unwanted sexual behaviours on the New York and London transport systems (BTP, 2015; Lo, 2013; Stringer, 2007).

Victims may also fail to report unwanted sexual behaviour for fear of being held to blame (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010) despite studies demonstrating blame is attributed to perpetrators rather than victims (Landström et al, 2016). Victim-blaming has been theoretically framed in terms of rape myths; preconceptions or stereotypes that blame the victim (Burt, 1980). For instance a female travelling in an empty train carriage may feel that others will judge them, seeing their own actions (to choose that carriage or travel time) as avoidable. However unwanted sexual behaviour most commonly occurs on crowded public transport, during the busy commuting periods (Lambillion, 2012; Stringer, 2007; Twyford, 2013).

Overcrowding on public transport may allow perpetrators to carry out their actions unnoticed and without consequence (Gekoski et al, 2015; Stringer, 2007). Even if noticed, passenger density may lead to the act being seen as ambiguous, thus reducing the likelihood of a bystander intervening (Batson 1998). Furthermore a diffusion of responsibility can occur in a group context, such as a train full of commuters, whereby a bystander has a lower sense of responsibility compared to when alone (Nickerson et al, 2014). Given that Latané and Darley's (1970) bystander intervention model theorises that an individual must recognise the event, understand it as needing intervention and accept responsibility before intervention can occur, it is perhaps unsurprising that few

reports of unwanted sexual behaviours on public transport come from bystanders (Stringer, 2007).

Being a victim of unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport can have wide ranging consequences and may result in a victim ceasing to use public transport. This can lead to social isolation and health problems, reduced self-esteem, increased feelings of vulnerability (Burgess and Holstrom, 1985; Loukaitou- Sideris, 2014). Despite it being clear that it is the behaviour of the perpetrator rather than the victim that needs to change (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014), if a victim of unwanted sexual behaviour continues to use public transport they may adapt their behaviours to avoid future victimisation (see Gekoski et al, 2015). Even without falling victim themselves, a fear of crime can lead to women avoiding using public transport or restricting their movements (London Assembly, 2016; Newton, 2014; TfL, 2015).

Given the effect that unwanted sexual behaviour can have upon women's mobility it is important to understand how people perceive such crimes as this may inform us of why such crimes are underreported by bystanders. A greater understanding of this could help inform campaigns aimed at reducing unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport. The current study focuses on whether perceptions of unwanted sexual behaviour and subsequent expected responses differ according to a) how busy the public transport is at the time of the incident, b) how severe the incident is, and c) how aware the bystander is of unwanted sexual behaviours. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Victim blame will be higher for incidents occurring on low passenger density (e.g. empty carriage) as opposed to high passenger density (e.g. crowded carriage) transport.

H2. Perceived seriousness of different levels of unwanted sexual behaviours (e.g. touching vs. verbal abuse) will be mediated by passenger density.

H3. Bystanders will be more likely to intervene in a high vs. low passenger density scenario.

H4. Increasing awareness of unwanted sexual behaviours will lead to a greater likelihood to intervene or report.

## **Data and methods**

A self-selecting sample of 120 participants (28 male and 92 female) from a university in the UK volunteered to take part in the study in exchange for course credit. Participants, who ranged in age from 18 to 50 years ( $M = 27.23$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), completed the study online in their own time via a survey link distributed to potential participants.

Data was collected using a vignette approach whereby participants read a series of hypothetical scenarios describing incidents of unwanted sexual behaviour before rating the incident in relation to their perceptions of the situation and the actions they may take if they were a fellow passenger (bystander). The vignette approach is a valuable tool for

manipulating variables that would not be possible to manipulate via observational studies (Hughes and Huby, 2004).

Across six vignettes the independent variables of passenger density (high, low) and severity of unwanted sexual behaviour (high, moderate, low) were manipulated. The unwanted sexual behaviours were sexual touching (high severity), sexual rubbing (moderate severity), and verbal sexual suggestion (low severity) which took place on either crowded (high passenger density) or empty (low passenger density) public transport. In each scenario the victim was female and the perpetrator male. It is important to note that the classification of unwanted sexual behaviours in the study into ‘high, moderate and low’ severities are in no way intended to diminish the seriousness of any of the behaviours and are for analysis purposes only. The order of presentation of the vignettes was counterbalanced in a repeated measures design where participants read all six vignettes.

A further independent variable, awareness of unwanted sexual behaviour (heightened, not heightened), was manipulated by randomly allocating participants to a video condition. Here half of the participants viewed a one minute public transport safety campaign (*Report it to stop it. BTP, 2015*) to heighten their awareness of unwanted sexual behaviours on public transport and how to report this prior to reading the vignettes.

The dependent variables were perceptions of victim and perpetrator blame, incident seriousness, likelihood of reporting and likelihood of bystander intervention. A sample



question was “To what extent was the *female* to blame for the situation?”, anchored at either end of the response scale by ‘not at all to blame’ (a rating of 0) and ‘totally to blame’ (a rating of 10). In order to test the effect of passenger density, behaviour severity and unwanted sexual behaviour awareness upon the dependent variables a series of 3-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Bonferonni post hoc comparisons and paired samples t-tests were conducted to explore relevant significant results. Data was analysed using a standard statistical package.

## Results

### *Victim and perpetrator blame*

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

An extremely low level of blame was attributed towards the female victim (Table 1). Perceptions of blame attributed to the victim were the same regardless of transport density, incidence severity or awareness of unwanted sexual behaviour (hereafter ‘awareness’), with there being no significant interactions between independent variables.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

In contrast, participants rated the male perpetrator as being highly to blame for the unwanted sexual behaviour (Table 2). Whilst a high level of blame was attributed to the

perpetrator, some variation in ratings was determined by a passenger density x behaviour severity interaction ( $F(2, 236) = 10.37, p < .001$ ). In the high density condition significant differences were seen in ratings of perpetrator blame between high ( $M = 9.82$ ), moderate ( $M = 8.21$ ), and low ( $M = 9.15$ ) severity conditions (all  $p < .05$ ). In the low density condition, whilst ratings of blame were high across the three sexual behaviour severities, ratings of blame in the high severity condition ( $M = 9.74$ ) were significantly higher than in the moderate and low severity conditions ( $M = 9.11$  and  $M = 8.96$ ) ( $p < .05$ ). The latter two ratings did not significantly differ from one another in the low density condition.

#### *Incident seriousness*

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Across the conditions of density and severity were considerable variations in how serious the incident of unwanted sexual behaviour was perceived (Table 3). Participants rated the high severity condition as being more serious overall ( $M = 9.38$ ) than the moderate severity condition ( $M = 6.34$ ) which in turn was rated as a more serious incident than the low severity condition ( $M = 3.93$ ),  $F(2, 236) = 310.02, p < .001$ , thus confirming that distinctions were made between the severities of the reported incidents of unwanted sexual behaviour. Behaviour severity did interact with passenger density however ( $F(2, 236) = 6.95, p = .001$ ). Equivalent high severity behaviours were rated slightly higher in terms of seriousness in the high compared to low density condition ( $M = 9.51$  vs.  $M = 9.24, t(119) = 1.81, p = .07$ ) whereas moderate and low severity

behaviours were rated lower in terms of seriousness in the high rather to low density condition ( $M = 6.01$  vs.  $M = 6.63$  and  $M = 3.76$  vs.  $M = 4.06$ ), although this difference was only significant for the moderate severity behaviour ( $t(119) = -3.02, p = .003$ ).

#### *Likelihood of reporting and intervention*

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

With there being under-reporting of sexual crimes to the police it was important to consider how likely it was that participants felt they would report an incident of unwanted sexual behaviour should they be witness to one. Whilst a main effect of severity indicated that the more severe the incident the more likely participants were to report it ( $F(2, 236) = 393.47, p < .001$ ), reporting likelihood was tempered by an interaction with passenger density ( $F(2, 236) = 5.04, p = .007$ ). As shown in Table 4, when the incident of unwanted sexual behaviour was serious the likelihood of this being reported was equally high regardless of the passenger density ( $M = 8.20$  and  $M = 8.17$ ,  $t(119) = .14, p = .89$ ). For moderate unwanted sexual participants gave their likelihood of calling the police as low to moderate but they were more likely to in a low than high density setting ( $M = 4.09$  and  $M = 3.24$ ,  $t(119) = -3.43, p = .001$ ). When the unwanted sexual behaviour was of low severity the likelihood of calling police was also low but again likelihood was slightly higher in the low compared to high density setting ( $M = 1.74$  and  $M = 1.36$ ,  $t(119) = -2.26, p = .03$ ). Awareness had no significant effect upon participants' likelihood to report.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

Table 5 shows how likely it was that participants would intervene should they be witness to an incident of unwanted sexual behaviour. Participants were more likely to intervene in a low rather than high density setting ( $F(1, 117) = 9.09, p = .003$ ), although intervention in both settings was moderate ( $M = 4.62$  vs.  $M = 4.99$ ). Participants were also more likely to intervene the more severe the behaviour was ( $M = 7.80, 4.20$  and  $2.41, F(2, 234) = 208.99, p < .0005$ ). There was no significant interaction between density and severity. There was however an interaction between transport density and awareness in relation to intervention ( $F(1, 117) = 5.03, p = .003$ ) with participants being more likely to intervene after having viewed the video in the low density condition than the high density condition ( $M = 4.77$  vs.  $M = 5.43$ ) whereas intervention was comparable across the two densities for the participants who had not viewed the transport safety video ( $M = 4.46$  vs.  $M = 4.55$ ).

## Discussion

Blame was found to be firmly placed with the perpetrator rather than the victim, with perceptions of perpetrator blame, incident seriousness, reporting, and to some extent intervention all influenced by passenger density and incident severity. Raising participant awareness of unwanted sexual behaviour had a limited effect upon likelihood of intervening only. The findings are discussed in relation to the hypotheses below.

The first hypothesis, that victim blame would be higher in an empty setting, was not supported. Instead victim blame was low and perpetrator blame high in all scenarios. Whilst there may be biases that perpetrate myths about victims being to blame for the sexual crimes, the current findings add to the literature which has found blame to be attributed to the perpetrator rather than the victim (Landström et al, 2016).

In support of hypothesis 2, participants clearly distinguished between the unwanted sexual behaviours in terms of their seriousness with further distinction made in relation to passenger density. Whilst it may be expected that severe offences would occur in quiet settings, for these to occur in a crowded public setting increases the perception of seriousness being a greater violation of expected rules of behaviour. In contrast there may be ambiguity in interpreting behaviour of moderate severity (sexual rubbing) in a crowded setting. That 'lesser' behaviours were viewed less seriously in the high density setting adds to the suggestion that there may be normalising of some unwanted sexual behaviours due to ambiguity in defining them (Herrera et al, 2014; Pina et al, 2009).

Participants' likelihood to report incidents to the police was higher the more severe the unwanted sexual behaviour was. In partial support of hypothesis 3, reporting the incident, but not intervening to help, was further mediated by passenger density. Taken within the context of models of bystander intervention (e.g. Latane and Darley, 1970; Nickerson et al, 2014), these findings suggest that the incident was recognised with the need for intervention (including reporting to police) being determined by severity of the event. For intervention at least, diffusion of responsibility was not evident as

responsibility was accepted by way of the severity of the incident rather than the density of the setting. Thus whether others were present or not made no difference to whether someone would intervene.

These findings should be considered in a real-world context. High passenger density (crowding) is akin to peak commuting times and diffusion of responsibility may occur because fellow passengers are focused on their own work day. A reluctance to delay a journey has been noted as a reason for the under-reporting of crime on public transport (London Assembly, 2016). A more commonly cited reason though is the perception that the incident will not be taken seriously or that it is not serious enough to report (BTP, 2015; Gekoski et al, 2015; Stringer, 2007; TfL, 2015). Indeed incidents of lower severity in the current study attracted moderate to low reporting likelihood suggesting that they were not viewed as serious enough to report. Furthermore, the likelihood of reporting was not higher amongst the participants who had viewed the awareness campaign which aimed to encourage reporting of incidents of any severity. Thus hypothesis 4 was not supported.

### *Limitations*

In using a predominantly female student population attitudes towards victims may have been more positive than those held by the general public (De Judicibus and McCabe, 2001). This coupled with a growing awareness of unwanted sexual behaviours in the

UK (Gekoski et al, 2015) may provide some explanation for why victim-blame was low and raising awareness had a limited effect. As females view unwanted sexual behaviours as being more serious and less ambiguous than males do (Ekore, 2012; Madan and Nalla, 2016) the findings may be more representative of the female perspective. However, with the adoption of gender mainstreaming mandates by some Western countries it is important to consider women's voices (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016).

The fairly low likelihood of intervention may also be due to the over-representation of females in the sample. In some situations males have been found to be more likely than women to display helping behaviours (Eagly and Crowley, 1986). Further studies should consider how the gender of the victim, perpetrator and bystander interact. This will be useful in developing campaigns highlighting the bystander rather than victim perspective (Gekoski et al, 2015) thus removing the onus for reporting from the victim.

Given the focus of the study upon perceptions and behaviours on public transport it would have been useful to consider whether the participants were themselves public transport users. Being 'transport captive' may have made the scenarios presented in the vignette more salient. Whilst the use of vignettes cannot fully reflect the complexity of the real world, their use negates some of the ethical dilemmas associated with observational research and sensitive research topics such as sexual harassment (Hughes and Huby, 2004).

## **Implications and conclusions**

The key finding that passenger density can have an effect upon how an incident of unwanted sexual behaviour is perceived and acted upon has implications for women's safety. As most incidents of unwanted sexual behaviour occur during the rush hour period, where action (reporting/intervening) is least likely, it is important to continue to raise awareness not just of what unwanted sexual behaviours are but when they may occur. That most unwanted sexual behaviours occur during peak times may be contrary to women's expectations in terms of their personal safety. Women may already tailor their movements to avoid traveling at quiet times, especially at night (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016). Of course as the most serious offences (e.g. rape) are mostly likely to occur at such times caution is needed here. Nevertheless the expectation that unwanted sexual behaviours do not occur when people may feel safer needs to be challenged. However, women should not be made to feel that their movements need further restricting. While some countries have introduced women only carriages in an attempt to address this problem it has been argued that these put the onus on women rather than perpetrators to change their behaviours and provide short-term solutions only (Gekoski et al, 2015).

In reality, whilst unwanted sexual behaviours do occur on the public transport system in the UK a majority of passengers here travel without incident (TfL, 2015), partly a result of making safety on public transport a policy priority (Gekoski et al, 2015). Furthermore, although raising awareness had little effect in the current study, there is evidence that campaigns are working, with there being a 36% increase in reports



of unwanted sexual behaviours since the BTP's 'Report it to Stop it' campaign was launched, resulting in a 40% increase in arrests (TfL, 2016).

However, reducing crime does not necessarily led to a reduced fear of crime (Ferraro, 1995; Newton, 2014). Women's fear of crime in public spaces, such as on public transport, exceeds the actual (low) rates of reported crimes in these environments (Loukaitou-Sideris et al, 2009). Such fear can impact upon women's participation in the built environment, in that they may be constrained with regards to when or how they travel (Loukaitou-Sideris et al, 2009; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016; Yavuz and Welch, 2010). Keddy (2015) argues that the relationship between women's fear of crime and public space should be taught to students of architecture, "sensitizing future architects to gender-based actual threats to personal security" (p.40).

A wealth of initiatives exist to tackle the problem of unwanted sexual behaviours (see Gekoski et al (2015) for a review) and whilst there is evidence that some of these approaches are working more needs to be done, including widening the focus of reporting unwanted sexual behaviours. Much of the onus for reporting falls upon the victim whereas bystanders (e.g. fellow passengers) can be a valuable source of additional surveillance. The reluctance of 'bystanders' in the current study to act upon the lesser behaviours may be because of enduring uncertainty with regards to the behaviour and what actions can or should be taken. Further consideration to the bystander perspective is needed to explore why there may be a reluctance to act. Such information would be valuable to help develop further initiatives and may further contribute to 'what works' in the reduction of unwanted sexual behaviours.

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Table 1

Ratings of victim blame (0 = not at all to blame to 10 = completely to blame).

Sexual Behaviour	Transport Density	
	High	Low
	M (SD)	M (SD)
High Severity		
Video	.37 (.54)	.69 (1.56)
No Video	.73 (1.98)	.42 (.77)
Total	.56 (1.50)	.55 (1.21)
Moderate Severity		
Video	.70 (1.43)	.37 (.50)
No Video	.81 (1.47)	.68 (1.25)
Total	.76 (1.45)	.54 (.98)
Low Severity		
Video	.69 (1.57)	.77 (1.83)
No Video	.45 (.82)	.45 (1.16)
Total	.56 (1.23)	.60 (1.51)

Table 2

Ratings of perpetrator blame (0 = not at all to blame to 10 = completely to blame).

Sexual Behaviour	Transport Density	
	High M (SD)	Low M (SD)
High Severity		
Video	9.81 (.30)	9.70 (1.21)
No Video	9.83 (.24)	9.78 (.36)
Total	9.82 (.27)	9.74 (.87)
Moderate Severity		
Video	8.60 (2.16)	9.38 (1.27)
No Video	7.87 (3.13)	8.87 (2.20)
Total	8.21 (2.73)	9.11 (1.84)
Low Severity		
Video	9.25 (1.66)	9.12 (2.16)
No Video	9.07 (2.09)	8.81 (2.60)
Total	9.15 (1.90)	8.96 (2.40)

Table 3

Ratings of incident seriousness (0 = not very serious to 10 = very serious).

Sexual Behaviour	Transport Density	
	High	Low
	M (SD)	M (SD)
High Severity		
Video	9.68 (.86)	9.30 (1.92)
No Video	9.36 (1.38)	9.18 (1.70)
Total	9.51 (1.17)	9.24 (1.80)
Moderate Severity		
Video	6.44 (2.60)	6.94 (2.75)
No Video	5.63 (3.13)	6.36 (2.98)
Total	6.00 (2.92)	6.63 (2.88)
Low Severity		
Video	4.00 (2.64)	4.41 (2.95)
No Video	3.55 (2.45)	3.76 (2.62)
Total	3.76 (2.54)	4.06 (2.78)



Table 4

Likelihood of reporting to police (0 = not very likely to 10 = very likely).

Sexual Behaviour	Transport Density	
	High	Low
	M (SD)	M (SD)
High Severity		
Video	8.16 (2.60)	7.89 (2.94)
No Video	8.24 (2.54)	8.42 (2.45)
Total	8.20 (2.56)	8.17 (2.69)
Moderate Severity		
Video	3.47 (3.32)	4.53 (3.60)
No Video	3.04 (2.91)	3.70 (3.20)
Total	3.24 (3.10)	4.09 (3.41)
Low Severity		
Video	1.57 (2.03)	2.07 (2.67)
No Video	1.17 (1.47)	1.45 (1.86)
Total	1.36 (1.76)	1.74 (2.28)

Table 5

Likelihood of intervention (0 = not very likely to 10 = very likely).

Sexual Behaviour	Transport Density	
	High	Low
	M (SD)	M (SD)
High Severity		
Video	7.90 (2.97)	8.17 (2.62)
No Video	7.69 (2.76)	7.44 (3.15)
Total	7.79 (2.85)	7.78 (2.96)
Moderate Severity		
Video	4.05 (3.54)	5.10 (3.40)
No Video	3.64 (3.32)	4.01 (3.36)
Total	3.83 (3.42)	4.51 (3.41)
Low Severity		
Video	2.36 (2.65)	3.01 (3.45)
No Video	2.05 (2.61)	2.22 (2.53)
Total	2.19 (2.62)	2.58 (3.01)